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ABSTRACT

A "write to learn" collaboration between a business professor and a writing teacher at Indiana University's School of Business improved both student writing skills and knowledge of international economic policy issues. As part of a larger Indiana University project to improve undergraduates's writing skills, a course titled "Business Conditions Analysis," designed to familiarize students with macroeconomic policy and models and to help them to apply these to real-life global situations, involved lectures and a complex writing assignment. Throughout the course each student investigated different macroeconomic aspects of one particular European country which he or she had selected. The students' first reports indicated that they knew how to research information and that they regarded research as more important than writing. For the second report drafts and a one-on-one conference with a writing consultant were required. These reports showed marked improvement due to the length of time spent on the actual writing and the increased knowledge of the topic. The third report required preliminary drafts, and a small group meeting with the writing instructor which introduced a collaborative research concept. Overall the students learned to see writing as part of the process of learning rather than simply a product. (JB)

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TEACHING BUSINESS STUDENTS TO LEARN ABOUT GLOBAL ISSUES THROUGH WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the "write to learn" efforts in one international business class at Indiana Business School. The collaboration between a business professor and a writing teacher has proved to be of great value for both the students and the instructors. The approaches taken in this course did not only improve the students' writing skills, but also their knowledge about and understanding of international economic policy issues.

Since the late 70's writing teachers and scholars in the pedagogy of writing such as Toby Fulweiler, Art Young, James Kinneavy, Elaine Maimon, and Janet Emig have argued that students' writing, learning, and critical thinking can only improve if "they learn to value writing, and to practice it in the daily business of learning in all disciplines." This call for a more "global" perspective on the uses and functions as well as on the pedagogy of writing was reiterated at a recent national conference for writing teachers and researchers. Despite numerous obstacles, many colleges and universities have so far followed this call and have established "writing across the disciplines" or "writing across the curriculum" programs.

In the fall of 1989 the business school at Indiana University launched its pilot project to improve its undergraduate students' writing as well as critical skills. In keeping with some of the administrations plans to enhance learning at I.U., the school independently hired two outside writing consultants and placed them with four, mainly upper-level, business courses, in order to bring intensive "writing to learn" components into the business classes.

The approach taken in one of the courses involved in the

experiment proved to business faculty, students, and the administration that a broader vision of the nature and function of writing and writing pedagogy can help students as well as instructors deal with the complexities of an increasingly global world (and business world) in which writing can do more than keep us in touch with each other. We feel that our experience as we present it here can make an important argument for the integration of more writing assignments as well as investigations into the nature of writing in business into business classes.

One of the courses involved in the I.U. business school project was a business economics class, with the rather general title "Business Conditions Analysis." The course was designed to familiarize students with macroeconomic policy and models as well as help them to apply these to a real-life and global situation. The lectures developed an open macroeconomic model of the U.S. and analyzed policy in that context. The content of these lectures was tested by traditional multiple choice and short answer exams. The application of the models to a global policy situation was bound to a complex writing assignment which consisted of three reports as well as several drafts to these reports. In our course writing was taught and used as a tool for learning as well as evaluating learning about global issues. Each student had to pick one particular European country, and throughout the course investigated different macroeconomic aspects of this country, in order to decide whether or not this country could take an effective part in the planned unification of Europe by 1992. The goal of the assignments

was to improve the students' ability to deal with international issues in economics and to develop and express their knowledge in effective and professional writing. A desired side effect was to enhance the students' knowledge of geographical, political, cultural and historical perspectives of the country they chose as well as of Europe as a whole.

The lectures never preempted any of the issues the students had to investigate for their reports, and this arrangement helped to tie the goals of the content teacher as well as those of the writing teacher together in a very effective way, and furthermore helped to exemplify the overall goals the School of Business had defined for the experimental writing project. The topic of the writing assignment given in this course and the way in which it was presented to the students only underscores our contention that writing can indeed be used as a tool for more in depth learning. Most of the students in the class had either no or very limited experience with Europe and/or European economics. They had to learn how to make themselves experts about their country, to define their topic clearly, to make connections between seemingly separate issues, and to develop a sense of audience (i.e. who are they writing for?). They were also faced with having to form and effectively deliver an opinion in cases where the facts did not clearly dictate one view. They had to decide from a diverse set of facts whether or not their country would be a cooperative partner in the new European integration. In other words, the students had to learn their subject matter as well as employ critical and

analytical skills and develop their knowledge and their skills through a recursive writing process. The course and its results are positive testimony for the success a "writing to learn" project can generate among the students and for an institution.

From the outset it was our shared goal to challenge the students to learn independently and to take responsibility for their success in this course. Our ideas for the class meshed well, because we both believed in a process orientation towards learning and writing rather than a product orientation. We did not want to serve knowledge to our students on a silver platter, or pretend that there are magic formulas for successful writing; rather we were (and are) both genuinely interested in encouraging learning and continuous discovery through writing. We both assumed that the students had enough background in terms of general writing skills, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, etc., but did not have extensive practice in the application of these skills. With the writing assignment we wanted to give the students a chance to gain more experience with the most fundamental as well as the most advanced aspects of writing. Therefore, the emphasis of our feedback to their writing was aimed at advanced writing skills such as organization, clarity, analysis, critical evaluation, and identification with the issue. We placed full responsibility for sentence level correctness of their writing in the students' hands which meant that we only addressed problems in this area when it absolutely hampered the development of analytical abilities or critical argumentation.

We began the course with a small test of the knowledge the students brought to the course. To say that American students know very little about Europe would only be to repeat the obvious. Despite the fact that many of their classes and the textbooks they read often mention the increasing globalization of the world markets, they very rarely have a chance to experience the extent of this globalization first hand. The American students' understanding of languages, cultures, political, and economic structures outside of the US is limited, and our students were no exceptions to this general state of affairs.

The first report was a further test of their understanding of global issues. The students finished these reports without having written drafts. They were asked to explain what EC policies they had identified as important for European unification in 1992. The central research question they had to develop for this report was based on the consideration of political structures and the controls these structures exerted over monetary and fiscal policies and tax systems. We evaluated the reports on comprehensiveness, structure, clarity, strength of argument, and use of evidence. The majority of these reports proved that the students were able to do their own "research" i.e. reading source material, taking notes, and summarizing their sources, but that they tended to do the actual writing as a one-shot version the night before the deadline. Many students think that the so-called "research process" is more important than the writing process. This mistaken emphasis on "research as the real work" seems to imply that writing is indeed

secondary and serves only as an advanced form of note-recording. In this course we wanted to work against this wrong preconception by encouraging the students to read and write; receive comments; then read and write again.

For the second report the students had to hand in a draft which was read and commented on by the writing teacher. Furthermore, the students were asked to see the writing consultant in one-on-one conferences in order to discuss a possible second draft, open questions, the nature of the assignment, or writing strategies in general. The conferences gave the consultant a chance to address the individual student's writing problems and suggest ways to improve the processes of learning and writing. Moreover, the conferences allowed the writing teacher to present the students with examples of her own research and to demonstrate a variety of investigative and writing strategies. The students had an opportunity to ask specific questions about the assignment and its execution as well as discuss the overall research question.

As the central research question for the second report, the students were asked to focus on the past macro-economic behavior of the country they had picked at the beginning of the semester. They were asked to consider if this past behavior indicated potential success or failure for EC unification. They had to find and analyze data on economic growth, inflation, unemployment rates, exchange rates, tax systems, and trade balances. Their papers were, again, evaluated on comprehensiveness, strength of argument, structure, and validity of conclusions. For the majority of

students the second report was much more effectively written and successfully argued than the first. Some students improved so dramatically that they surprised us as well as themselves, and all of them felt inspired to work even more intensely on the drafts and final version of the last report.

We feel that the students were able to write more successful second reports because their papers were not started and finished the night before they were due. The feedback on their drafts as well as the individual conferences had shifted their perception of what it meant to do research and to write in a business discipline. The students started to identify more and more with the issues they were investigating, and as they did so, they became increasingly able to make convincing cases for their interpretations. Throughout the process, however, we had to stress that there were no correct answers, that their instructors knew as much or as little about whether the predictions they would make were right or wrong, and that only time itself would be able to tell about that. We focused them on the quality of their investigation which was to include careful analysis and independent evaluation rather than search for the right answer. We emphasized too that this is often the case in research and management that one must make decisions and act without perfect certainty.

For the last report we asked the students to draw on all the knowledge they had collected and constructed so far in order to make careful predictions for the future. Their work centered around questions of policy making and legislation in Europe. While the

first two reports had asked them to identify important issues influencing the European unification and to evaluate these issues in economic terms, this third and last report asked them to look to the future and to decide whether European policy making would be able to make a unified Europe function effectively.

The third report was aimed at giving students another perspective on research. By asking them to go back to the results of their previous work, we laid a clear foundation for further research for them. Through more research they could revise or elaborate on their previous findings. For us one of the important aspects of learning through writing is that students are encouraged to revise or even change their previous positions if necessary. In our own research, we often abandon lines of argumentation when they become inconsistent or illogical with the rest of our work. This is true learning From students, though, we often expect that they somehow get their views and ideas right before they start writing or that they stick to their positions no matter how non-sensical. In this course we tried to bridge the discrepancies between our own writing and researching goals processes and those we expect of our students.

After the students handed in drafts for the third report, they were discussed with the writing instructor in small groups. The workshop atmosphere of these group discussions encouraged the students to define and fine-tune the issues of their last piece of writing for this course in public. Some students took advantage of the wealth of information others had to offer and in turn provided

valuable insights for some of their group members. The concept of collaborative research and team work which was introduced in this last part of the semester was again modeled by the work we did together. When it was appropriate the writing consultant shared her collaborative research work with the students.

The reports were again evaluated on comprehensiveness, structure, persuasiveness, and clarity, and again some students surprised us with the quality and sophistication of their work. The outstanding successes of these students were based not on better handling of grammar or punctuation, but on better thinking and arguing. The students had learned actively about the problems involved in European unification and acquired a global perspective. They had learned to master vast amounts of complex information about an issue of global importance in a critical manner. Their knowledge about Europe, its politics, economics and cultures had increased considerably. They had just as actively gained new insights into the nature and function of research and writing in a business discipline. The papers as well as the students themselves testified to this in very articulate ways. In interviews conducted with the students after the course, the writing consultant investigated the students' attitudes towards research and writing. Their answers reflected an increased commitment to writing in a recursive manner, focusing more on the process of learning through writing rather than on the product. Whether these new attitudes will carry over into their other courses is not really clear, partly because the majority of students in this class

were juniors and seniors, partly because the general atmosphere in many of their courses is not exactly conducive to the further development of a "writing to learn" perspective.

In the majority of their classes, many students are content to assume that they are learning canons of absolute truths rather than tools for more careful meaning and knowledge making. Often we, the instructors and teachers, give the students the impression that we are just as content to disseminate absolute truths rather than tools. It is very difficult to work against these deeply entrenched views of teaching and learning. Despite the fact that we tried to encourage open and honest inquiry into a global issue, we found ourselves confronted with not so global questions of "what do you want me to say?" "how should I answer this?" "is this the right way to do this?" So many of their prior experiences with writing in the business school as well as other departments across the university had influenced the students to doubt if not distrust the structures and strategies we were introducing to them. They were not sure about the ultimate purpose of the writing component in this class, because writing in many business courses, particularly business communication courses, is pragmatic and basic skills oriented.

The course and its components as we taught them tried to instill a more humanistic approach to professional training in the students. The writing assignment, the drafts, and the conferences all were geared to equip future professionals with more than the ability to write brief memos and to fill out forms. We wanted to

stimulate critical abilities in the students which would carry over into their professional lives. Despite the fact that we have no real measurement of the ultimate success of our intentions, we feel that we are answering to some of the challenges brought to us by the national and international business community. Leaders in business have recently criticized universities and colleges for not preparing their graduates for the responsibilities and opportunities of an increasingly global business environment. Merely vocational training is not and will not be sufficient to familiarize the students with the ethical background and the discourse of the community they will participate in.

From our own perspective we learned a lot about teaching learning through writing. The writing consultant became more familiar with the specific discourse of a business discipline. This broadened her views about the application of general writing pedagogy, and helped her make connections to her own work as a writing teacher and researcher. It became very clear through this experience that effective and creative teaching of writing can take place in the "cut and dry" environment of a business school. The business professor learned about the possibilities to include writing in more effective and extensive ways in the courses he is teaching. Together we helped the Indiana University School of Business define the basic requirements, such as innovative syllabi with well-designed writing assignments, a tolerant and honest teaching environment, and willingness to depart from the proven structures, which can make a project like this work for all parties

involved.

At the most recent Conference on College Composition and Communication many of the writing teachers and researchers present rallied for more extensive "writing across the curriculum" projects, for more interdisciplinarity, and a more global perspective of the role of rhetoric. Aside from encouraging more teachers (writing and otherwise) to depart from departmentally fixed paths, many of the speakers also called for more explicit investigations into the underlying teaching and learning principles of different disciplines. The course we taught together has attempted such an investigation. In the future we hope that we will be able to include more of our findings into the courses we teach, together or with other colleagues, and to make them the content rather than just the methodology of our courses.

In teaching our students to approach their learning with a more global perspective, we need to model such new approaches. International business classes can and have to contribute to international understanding. Writing, the way it was used in our class, can be a useful tool to foster both, tolerant and critical thinking. In any global field such as politics and business is important to look at the evidence presented and to draw conclusions which are appropriate to the ever-changing world. The context for professional thinking in global business is much larger and much more complex than any classroom context; we cannot prepare our students for this complex world with traditional one-right-answer approaches to teaching and evaluating.